Review

The Language of Colour: an introduction

Theo van Leeuwen (2011)

Reviewed by: John A. Bateman

Bremen University, Germany

bateman@uni-bremen.de

In his latest book, Theo van Leeuwen turns his social semiotic gaze to 'colour'--and as befitting his social semiotic orientation, in particular to the specific positioning of colour as a resource for meaning making in social and cultural contexts. With this move, van Leeuwen argues that less culturally-embedded views of the phenomenon of colour necessarily fail to do justice to how colours are created and used within culturally-embedded practices. The book is primarily intended as a textbook for university or design students and so combines the central point of cultural embedding that van Leeuwen wishes to emphasise with a gradual introduction to the various ways in which colour has been theorised over the years. This generally succeeds very well. The book is straightforwardly written, with many of its points being made by examples, and presents an interesting and informative journey through various theoretical positions adopted towards colour, ranging from the ancient Greeks, through Goethe and up to modern times. It also quickly becomes clear that the title of the book may be somewhat misleading: van Leeuwen shows that there is no such thing as *the* language of colour: this would be precisely the kind of attribution of inherent meanings separated from social context that the book actually takes considerable pains to deconstruct.

One of the motivations that van Leeuwen raises for the book is that he considers it time to consider colour as a positive contribution to various areas of meaning making in its own right. A traditional distinction between 'colour' and 'design' had already been debated in the 15th century, according to which the principal locus of meaning making is attributed to design and colour is left to fill moods and nuances. Van Leeuwen considers his own previous relative disregard for colour as a relic of this tendency—a relic perhaps also respected in the publisher's design for the book, which is unfortunately a relentless grey on grey with figures separated out into their own separate 'colour plate' section in the middle. Such relegations of colour have naturally also been considered critically over the years and certainly do not fit well with the practices of today, where colour is commonly a natural component available throughout the design process—i.e., a resource for meaning making equal alongside others. Also linked here are various value judgements made about colour, ranging from requirements of 'purity' of colours for the achievement of aesthetic quality (Kant) to diametrically opposed positions celebrating the complexity and exuberance of mixtures and combinations (Derrida, Kristeva). Van Leeuwen sees social semiotics in general as having erred too far on the Kantian side, with distinctions such as colour placed as mere expressions of more abstract content (design). One of the intentions of the book is therefore to document this misbalance and to help establish the consciousness of the problem that is necessary to correct it.

The book itself is a slim volume, weighing in at just over 100 pages, and is divided into seven convenient bite-sized chapters well-suited to the reading habits of many of today's students. Each chapter ends with some exercises or activities, selected to encourage reflection or practice concerning the main topics raised and, also as suitable for a textbook, there are substantial

references to previous work and the positions taken; this latter is particularly welcome given that this has not always been the case in previous social semiotics texts. The book also includes a useful glossary of the main concepts and an extensive index.

The journey begins with van Leeuwen's main concern: establishing the case for a social semiotics of colour. Chapter 1 accordingly sets out what it means to adopt a social semiotic approach both in general and in the particular case of colour. Here the reader learns of three organising dimensions informing the social semiotic investigation: first, there are the semiotic resources of colour themselves, the materials and technologies used in their production; second, there are the cultural practices within which the uses of colour as a communicative resource have been developed; and third, there are considerations of semiotic change, as the values and meanings attributed to colour within changing practices also change. As often emphasised in the works of van Leeuwen and long-time collaborator Gunther Kress, this reconnection of the world of pure signification with the materiality of the signs employed is a central tenet and so naturally reoccurs in most of the individual chapters in one form or another. It is this that forms their main thrust in correcting the preference mentioned above for considering abstract forms rather than valuing material expression as such. Where this takes van Leeuwen in the current context will become clear below.

Chapter 2 introduces some of the prominent kinds of meanings with which colours have been attributed: in particular, colour symbolism and colour naturalism. The former is illustrated with examples from the Middle Ages, with traditional associations between colours and values or ideas—such as the conventional adoption of particular colours for various saints and other biblical characters in art works or broader associations such as, for example, 'black' with 'death and sin' and 'white' with 'purity and divinity' in Western traditions. Colour naturalism, in contrast, is situated against the backdrop of a loss of conventional, or semiotic, uses as colour became more of an embellishment, a way of achieving naturalistic effects, of recapturing the world as it appears to the eye. Treatments of colour then also came under the purview of science and methods were explored for measuring and combining colours to more closely approximate the world seen. Finally, van Leeuwen introduces the reader to the highly influential treatment of colour developed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe from 1810. Here colour is attributed with direct sensory effects and is aligned directly with personality traits. As van Leeuwen convincingly shows in many quotations in subsequent chapters, this style of giving meanings to colours is still very much with us today and surfaces in art, in psychological testing, in interior design, in fashion and many other places besides.

Chapter 3 then begins to consider how colours have been described more systematically by means of the development of a variety of 'colour systems'. At the outset, such systems generally involved exploration of how colours can be combined to yield other colours and concerned themselves with appropriate selections of 'primary' colours out of which all others might be produced. This was clearly of a very practical concern in painting but also came subsequently to support various technological developments, including colour photography and printing. Van Leeuwen sets out how the currently common intensity-hue-saturation system developed and shows the differences between the additive colour system found with light-based media and the subtractive colour system found in print and other dye or pigment based media. Also discussed here are some of the other properties that make up our colour perception that draw more on the materiality of the objects seen, such as texture, translucency and transparency; these come to play a greater role in Chapter 5, where van Leeuwen addresses the materiality of colour in more detail.

Chapter 4 opens up the discussion to consider the naming of colours, both within natural languages, setting out the widely known results from Berlin and Kay on colour naming 'universals' from the 1960s and the critiques that have been made of this position, and within artificial systems of colour codes of various kinds and naming practices from interior design familiar from contemporary usage. Throughout the chapter there is a general progression from the more isolated consideration of names for colours as individual lexical items that may be associated with given 'colours', treating the names more as labels for an objectively identifiable phenomenon delivered by objective coding schemes, towards colour terms as attributions of value in particular cultural practices. Here the colour terms are no longer the red, greens and blues of basic colour terms but instead take in more expressive formulations such as *Sultry Glance*, *Sheer Passion*, *Bright Delight* (Dulux paints) or the *Prune Drama Girl*, *Daring Rose*, *Wicked Brown* of some brands of lipstick. Van Leeuwen suggests that all colour terms in fact have origins in such metaphorical extensions and makes a connection to Lakoff and Johnson's placement of metaphor at the heart of our language abilities (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Here the essential move is to also consider the naming of colours as a metaphorical response to physical experience, i.e., as *experiential metaphors*. Just as Lakoff and Johnson see much of language use arising out of a re-coding of physically embodied interaction with the environment, van Leeuwen suggests that colour naming practices are similarly a process of such experiential re-coding.

Chapter 5 is then the theoretical core of the book, building substantially on earlier joint work with Gunther Kress (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). Here van Leeuwen proposes what he terms a 'parametric theory of colour', similar in vein to his proposed treatment of voice quality (van Leeuwen, 2009). The parametric approach is intended to redress some of the imbalance towards views of colour separated from materiality by offering a coding scheme that also includes *dimensions* of material variation of the kind mentioned in Chapter 3, such as luminance and texture. To introduce the parametric view, van Leeuwen leads the reader into the traditional linguistic notions of distinctive features, which he somewhat unfortunately characterises inaccurately as 'binary' instead of simply 'digital' or 'discrete'. Then, in contrast to discrete coding systems, he proposes a related, 'non-distinctive' feature description made up of several simultaneously available dimensions, each varying continuously rather than discretely. Descriptions of actual material occurrences of colours in a broader sense are then to be placed against their respective values for these dimensions. This is also seen as a way of characterising entire sets of colours that may be grouped into colour schemes by harmony (of some dimensional values) or contrast.

Chapter 6 returns to some of the applications that might be made of this account and considers the use of colours in art and architecture. Here van Leeuwen focuses on what he describes as the 'return of colour' to modern art and the ways in which colours are motivated and described in descriptions of buildings and interior design.

Finally, chapter 7 discusses colours in 'contemporary life', focusing on colour as a marker of identity and as a resource for constructing textuality through colour cohesion and contrast in document layouts and typography. In order to function at all to signify identity, attention is drawn here to the supporting normative discourses in which socially sanctioned 'authorities', such as fashion experts, designers, artists, etc., state or enact not only particular colour choices but also the meanings that are to be ascribed to those choices. The chapter, and hence the book, ends with some brief conclusions reached concerning the changing role of colour over time and the meanings that it takes on.

Over its seven chapters the book therefore succeeds in taking the reader through a range of basic accounts of colour and the ways in which colour has been described and used over time. This gathers together useful foundations for reflecting on the phenomenon of colour and its social semiotic construction. It is also clearly an introductory book, however, and its main contribution is in providing a starting point for talking about colour in its own right. For my own students I would prefer something a little more analytic, although I am sure that few of them would thank me for it. The examples and exercises would no doubt lead to discussion, but the analytic framework presented can only support the first few steps in that discussion. The exercises also seem to favour more of a design background than, for example, a semiotic or linguistic background, with many practical tasks involving selecting colour schemes and motivating their use. Apart from the parametric framework developed in Chapter 5, much of the book's discussion is couched in terms of example quotations of how people have talked about colour, which is certainly consistent with the social semiotic goal of describing actual practices but does not always lead us far away from surface considerations. In that sense, rather little changes over time: the discussion of colours as receiving many different kinds of values appears to be a constant. Semiotically this phenomenon is not considered with any particular degree of generality and there are a few places in the book where the foundations of the account appear to be in need of further development.

The clearest area where this is the case is precisely that highlighted by social semiotics itself as a concern in need of renewed attention: the *materiality* of semiotic resources. Here the model relied upon is that of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) in which several relevant distinctions are drawn, the central one for current purposes being that between 'mode' and 'medium'. Mode is characterised as the semiotic aspect; medium as the materiality. Attention to the materiality of semiotic resources is consequently a focus on 'medium' in Kress and van Leeuwen's terms and as set out in the current book at the beginning of Chapter 3. The parametric system of colour proposed in Chapter 5 is then explicitly situated as a description of medium rather than of mode. Van Leeuwen draws attention in the conclusion of the book to the problematic divide between, on the one hand, semiotic accounts, that have tended to describe modes abstracted from their materiality, emphasising their systematicity, and on the other, the actual use of a resource such as colour in society "in all its complexities, and with all its contradictions" (p. 98). This is the task that van Leeuwen picks out particularly for *social* semioticians (his emphasis).

There are certainly going to be many ways in which these complexities can be explored and positions will differ; the looser, more ethnographic approach taken by van Leeuwen will appeal to many and is also readily intelligible for beginners. Personally I retain too much of the urge to systematicity, however, to follow van Leeuwen's proposal that we distinguish systematic modes from rather more unsystematic media and then focus on the latter. And, indeed, this division is not convincingly made in the book at hand. The discussion is in fact at its weakest when modes are considered. It is, for example, stated that modes can be organised according to the Hallidayan metafunctions; yet the only example of a mode description that the book does present, a network of colour distinctions organised around distinctive features (chromatic vs. non-chromatic, blue vs. red vs. yellow, etc.), patently is not (Figure 5.1 discussed on p. 60). A claim that a resource can be used in ways that achieve functions that may be classified according to the Hallidayan metafunctions is by itself largely vacuous, as almost any resource certainly can: the important distinguishing notion that metafunctions have *consequences for the internal organisation* of a semiotic resource falls by the wayside. Moreover, divorcing media (in Kress and van Leeuwen's sense) from modes naturally leaves a problem for any semiotic account that wishes to discuss meanings. Van Leeuwen's solution is to

consider Lakoff and Johnson's experiential metaphor as the key: certain combinations of parametric values characterising the medium (material) are proposed as experiential sources of chains of metaphorical meaning making. The material is by this means supposed to take up meanings of its own autonomously from a possible participation in modes, as argued rather more fully in van Leeuwen (2009:70-71) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2001:74-78). Thus, we learn here that "the meaning potential of lightness ... is just that, 'lightness'" (p. 58-59) and this can then be taken up in religious works as "divine light" or in interior decorating as "peaceful" or "tranquillity". But this is just where the task of describing (systematically) the various (and possibly mutually contradictory) semiotic modes that are employed in such religious or interior decorating discourses begins: we cannot avoid that task if our goal is to account for meanings, even social semiotic meanings. I doubt the existence of a single 'semiotic mode' of colour just as much as that of a single 'language' of colour—but this does not necessarily restrict an account to considering only materiality. In short, there is evidently far more groundwork to be done here and so those who might use the book as a textbook would probably be well advised to consider their own positions before the student discussions start!

There are also a few areas where it might have been interesting to have a little more information provided. For example, some more current views of colour as a phenomenon from analytic philosophy or cognitive science (e.g., in terms of the 'conceptual spaces' developed by Gärdenfors, 2000) may have provided additional conceptual clarity for framing questions, particularly concerning parametric systems, while perception, as in the perception of colour, is hardly mentioned at all. The omission of perception is a pity since this would interact well with the discussion of technologies of colour. The differing sensitivities of the light detectors in the eye according to the frequencies and intensities they respond to present a revealing angle on just how embodied (and species-specific!) our perception of colour, and of the technological devices we have developed for presenting colour, is (cf. e.g., Gärdenfors, 2000:13 and the references cited there). A further short chapter on this would have rounded out the volume nicely and may perhaps have presented a more appropriate introduction of the important notion of Gibson's (e.g., 1977) affordances. These are mentioned in Chapter 5 (p. 59) in quite the muddiest paragraphs of the entire book: the essential claim of affordances that perception works *directly* in terms of uses, not in terms of perception of properties, goes missing or is suppressed—the reader would do better here to follow through the discussion in Kress and van Leeuwen (2002: 355-360) to see what is meant. The position of colour as a resource for making discriminations in the environment could have been strengthened here considerably as well as perhaps providing a stronger lowest rung on the ladder of experiential metaphor, where there is clearly very much more to be said.

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